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SUBJECT: PROMOTING A PEACEFUL TRANSITION IN CHAD

REF: A. 05 NDJAMENA 1761
 1B. 05 NDJAMENA 1615
 1C. 05 NDJAMENA 1134

Classified By: Ambassador Marc M. Wall for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: As we define a strategy for advancing our growing interests in Chad, it is important that we work to convince President Deby to arrange for a peaceful handover of power. Our interests would be damaged by the spread of violent civil unrest, a prospect that is becoming dangerously more likely as a result of his refusal so far to consider such a transition. The way we best pursue our interests on Darfur, counter-terrorism, refugees, and oil is not by protecting Deby from the backlash against his bid for another term in power, but by encouraging him to step aside. We urge consideration of pro-active diplomatic efforts, including high-level contacts, speeches, engagement with the French and the Africans, and robust support for democratic institution-building. We also hope the timing of the next round of TSCTI training and the message in a possible SECDEF visit will take into account concerns about appearing to embrace Deby on the eve of elections that cap an electoral process most Chadians see as brazenly manipulated. END SUMMARY

12. (SBU) As Washington seeks to shape a strategy for dealing with the increasingly precarious situation in Chad, we would like to throw in our two cents worth. Ref A and previous reporting provide full accounts of President Deby's current mindset, his position within his family and clan, and his dealings with Khartoum and the Darfur resistance groups. Ref B presents a strategy for promoting democratic change. Ref C looks in detail at scenarios for political change. This assessment updates that reporting and offers further analysis of the case for encouraging a peaceful transition.

Deby's Position Today

13. (SBU) Deby has entered the new year cornered, but still standing and resolved to fight. The decisive actions by the World Bank have checked for now his plans to use oil revenues to buy weapons and votes in defense of his regime. Reports of arms shopping expeditions in Eastern Europe and aircraft arriving with crates loads of rifles nonetheless continue to filter in. Tensions with Sudan are mounting. Both sides are reinforcing troop positions on their border. Deby's Foreign Minister has returned from an extended trip to Europe and the United States aimed at drumming up support for Chad's

position against its neighbor. Deby received a lukewarm response to his own salesmanship at the summit he hosted for CEMAC leaders. Deby's support within his army appears secure at this point. He has avoided so far a violent rupture within his own clan and extended family, though key members who could have helped manage a transition have left the country. Daily life in the capital remains as dysfunctional as ever. N'Djamena's always fatalistic residents grumble about salary arrears and the state of political paralysis, but for the most part are not taking to the streets in protest.

Scenarios for Change

14. (C) The uneasy calm that prevails now could continue for months or even years to come. Deby may succeed once again in fighting his way out of the fix he finds himself in. He would have to keep his army together, avoid a violent family feud, reach out to other groups, mobilize international support, fend off rebels, keep Khartoum at bay, and stay healthy. But most observers here are convinced that sooner rather than later this "more of the same" scenario will give way to a "violent change" scenario. One possibility for Deby's demise is by a palace coup led by insiders in his family or his army. Another is a victory by an armed rebel group, possibly backed by Sudan's military. Still another is his death caused by the combination of a bad liver, war wounds, and reckless lifestyle catching up with him. However Deby goes, the aftermath would be ugly. If the National Assembly President were ever able to take over, as is stipulated in the constitution, his tenure would be short-lived. Civil war would erupt as warring factions vied for power, as has been Chad's experience in every other presidential succession.

15. (C) A better, if now far from likely, course of events would be a "peaceful transition" scenario (see ref C). This would involve Deby taking the lead in putting in place a credible transition plan. He would announce before the ruling Movement for Patriotic Salvation party congress in March that he does not intend to seek another term in power. He would work to find a candidate acceptable to his family, the army, the ruling party, and the opposition groups. Alternatively, he could agree to step down at the end of his term and cede power to an interim council drawn from the key ethnic groups, the security forces, and opposition groups. This council would be charged with preparing the way for internationally supported elections to be held within a year or two. It would be led by a figure-head president with national stature who would agree not to run in the elections. Former President Goukouni, now in exile in Algiers, has been mentioned as a possible candidate. Although his opponents would have a hard time accepting it, even Deby might be able to play this role, if this was necessary as part of a package giving him a face-saving way of leaving power.

Our Interests

16. (SBU) The United States has important and growing interests in Chad. Deby's regime works closely with us on counter-terrorism and is set to receive substantial assistance under the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative. It encourages religious tolerance and moderate Islamic practices. It has played until now a generally constructive role in pursuing peace in Darfur. It has welcomed over two hundred thousand Sudanese refugees, backed over the last two years by USD 130 million in U.S. humanitarian assistance. It hosts a USD 4 billion oil investment led by Exxon Mobil. It put in place, with our support, a path-breaking plan for managing oil revenues transparently and using them to reduce poverty. It has largely tolerated opposition parties and an outspoken independent press.

¶7. (C) The "violent change" scenario would hurt our efforts to work with Chad in pursuing these interests. Civil unrest would make Chad more vulnerable to terrorists and religious extremists, complicate the Darfur peace efforts, disrupt refugee relief, hinder oil production operations and exploration plans, further undermine transparent management of oil revenues, and force Deby or whatever warlord emerged after him to crack down on dissent. Deby's internal security problems are already starting to damage our interests. He appears to be funneling money and perhaps weapons to Darfur rebel groups drawn from his fellow Zaghawa clan in a bid for support in his increasingly dangerous rift with Khartoum. Desperate for funds to pay for arms and even mercenaries, he has defied his commitments to the World Bank by pushing through changes in the oil revenue law that effectively gut the scheme. His oil minister has privately threatened to shut down oil production in retaliation for the remedies imposed by the World Bank.

¶8. (C) If there was a reasonable chance that the "more of the same" scenario could pan out for long, our safest bet perhaps would be, like the French, to side with Deby. But no one here, not even the French, believes that Deby can look forward to staying in power much longer. The harder he fights to hang on, the more visible he becomes as a target for his many enemies and the more disruptive will be his inevitable fall. There are many reasons for the security problems Deby is facing, but the root cause is his refusal to put in place -- or at least acquiesce to -- a transition mechanism broadly accepted as legitimate. The fraudulent referendum overturning presidential term limits last June destroyed any remaining hopes that he would step down. The tensions this has provoked is why he needs so desperately to obtain arms to defend himself, why he was driven to get his hands on oil revenues in defiance of his commitments to the World Bank, why he is arming Zaghawa-based rebel groups in Darfur, and why he is now so vulnerable to pressures from Khartoum aimed at exploiting his internal weaknesses. Deby is responsible for destabilizing Chad with possible repercussions for Darfur in his determination to be president-for-life.

¶9. (C) We are convinced that our interests lie in doing what we can to help realize the "peaceful transition" scenario. While in a country such as Chad that has never experienced a peaceful transition, the odds of succeeding are not good. The French are wrong, however, in concluding that we should therefore try to prop up Deby's regime. That alternative only prolongs the agony. And the consequences that would follow its collapse are more likely to be even worse for Chad's internal stability and thus for our own interest in working with Chad on Darfur, refugees, counter-terrorism, oil, and democratic change.

Shaping the Future

¶10. (C) Promoting the "peaceful transition" scenario will require pro-active diplomatic engagement. Ref B and C describe our ideas in more detail. In outline, among steps we should consider taking are:

- bolstering our programs aimed at strengthening Chad's democratic institutions and supporting military reform;
- articulating more explicitly in speeches and in other statements our policy on Africa's "big men" who seek to perpetuate their hold on power, i.e., our non-support for Deby's bid for a third term;
- increasing high-level contacts, possibly including a presidential letter, visits by senior officials, and under certain circumstances the offer of a White House visit;
- approaching the French, likely including President Chirac, as well as other African leaders;

-- crafting a message that acknowledges Deby's accomplishments, but also underlines our hopes for his leadership in working toward a peaceful transition and our commitment to supporting such efforts.

¶11. (C) Such a strategy also requires attention to avoiding measures that might make us complicit in propping up his regime. The World Bank's decisive actions have denied Deby a free hand at using oil revenues to buy weapons and mercenaries. It will be important not to let Deby use our interest in cooperation on counter-terrorism in the TSCTI framework to protect him against his domestic enemies. We will need to look carefully at the timing of the next round of TSCTI training, now due to start in April, to avoid appearing to embrace Deby on the eve of fraudulent presidential elections expected to be held later in the spring. Similarly we would urge using Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's proposed visit in March to deliver a clear message in his private meetings and public statements on the role of the military in a democracy and the need for a peaceful transition.

¶12. (C) Success of this strategy will require buy-in from the French, who so far have not been willing to consider such a plan. Any further escalation of tensions on the border with Sudan will stymie progress. We should not overlook Deby's vulnerability to international prosecution once he steps down, an issue that no doubt haunts him. Thus we should not hold out false hopes that Deby will be receptive to our overtures. We will need to maintain cooperative relations with his regime, even as he fights to hold on to power. We nevertheless need to establish benchmarks with him and the Chadian people where we stand. There is a possibility he may be more open to considering other career options after his inauguration for a third term in August, assuming he makes it that long. We should then be looking for opportunities to encourage him to support efforts toward a peaceful transition later in the year.

WALL